Pampering and Prevention

African-American women in The Windy City are letting their hair down and talking about HIV.

May 28, 2009 By Kat Noel

Walk into any beauty shop, and you'll most likely find women sharing laughs and gossip while sitting under the hair dryer and getting pedicures. Candid conversations in hair salons are nothing new, but thanks to the Women's Collaborative of Greater Chicago (WC), the local ladies are chatting about more than celebrity and scandal. They talk—and learn—about HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

"We knew we had to do something to reach out to African-American and Latina women who aren't getting this information in messages that are culturally relevant to them," says Cynthia Tucker, director of prevention and community partnerships for AIDS Foundation of Chicago (AFC).

In 2005, the AFC partnered with three agencies to create WC—South Side Help Center (SSHC), Christian Community Health Center (CCHC) and Project VIDA. WC is a comprehensive prevention program that works with about 5,000 African-American and Latina women annually within 48 nail salons, barbershops and beauty supply stores on Chicago's South and West Sides, where the majority of new infections have occurred. The program has received financial backing from the National AIDS Fund in Washington, DC, the M A C AIDS Fund and the Chicago Department of Public Health.

Trained health educators provided by Project VIDA, SSHC and CCHC visit the various sites to conduct HIV testing and counseling and distribute prevention materials such as condoms—including female condoms—lubricant and pamphlets. They also lead discussions on negotiation skills and safer-sex options to help the women assert their sexual health with their partners.

"I get satisfaction when doing presentations and I see this 'Aha!' moment, where a light goes off in someone's head when they understand and are able to assess their risk," says Olivia Sanchez, interim executive director of Project VIDA and a health educator.

Though WC has had an overwhelming response from the younger clients of the businesses they serve, Sanchez admits that some older clients have expressed discomfort with discussing sex and HIV. Wanting to make the initiative inclusive for all ages without compromising WC's priority of providing HIV education, the program has been redeveloped to include information on breast

cancer, fibroids, hepatitis and heart disease.

“We now talk about anything that has a large effect on the population we work with,” Tucker explains. “Once we get the ladies into the conversation, we then introduce a discussion on HIV and AIDS.”

While beauty shop HIV prevention isn’t a new concept, given the rise in HIV infections among black women there is a definite need for more of these types of programs that can meet black women and Latinas where they are. According to the AFC, African-American women account for only 37 percent of the city’s general female population ages 13 and over, but they account for 75 percent of all women living with HIV. Tucker believes that in addition to social determinants such as poverty and a lack of access to health care, women often take on the role of caretaker, which may also contribute to high transmission rates.

“Women are more apt to care for others before taking care of themselves, so they are pretty much last on the list as far as getting information on HIV,” Tucker tells POZ. “It’s the same thing with breast cancer and other chronic diseases that really hit this particular population very hard.”

Tucker acknowledges that becoming aware of how disproportionately STIs and HIV affect African-American women and understanding the risks can be overwhelming. So the first thing she recommends to women is for them to find out their status, that way they’ll have a better idea how to move forward and protect themselves. Sanchez agrees and emphasizes the importance of being proactive one small step at a time, especially for women who usually don’t practice safer sex.

“I tell women to start using a condom once a week instead of never using them—that can make a big difference,” she says. She also encourages each woman to get to know her own body and understand how it works. “You don’t have to love or like your body,” Sanchez says, “but the more you learn, the more you realize that it’s your responsibility to take care of it.”

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